

*Current Perspectives in Social Theory*  
*Volume 25*

**NO SOCIAL SCIENCE  
WITHOUT CRITICAL THEORY**

**EDITED BY  
H. DAHMS**



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NO SOCIAL SCIENCE WITHOUT  
CRITICAL THEORY

# CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

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CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY VOLUME 25

# NO SOCIAL SCIENCE WITHOUT CRITICAL THEORY

EDITED BY

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**PART I:  
A PROGRAMMATIC  
INTRODUCTION**

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# HOW SOCIAL SCIENCE IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT CRITICAL THEORY: THE IMMERSION OF MAINSTREAM APPROACHES IN TIME AND SPACE ☆

Harry F. Dahms

## INTRODUCTION

Any endeavor to circumscribe, with a certain degree of precision, the nature of the relationship between social science and critical theory would appear to be daunting. Over the course of the past century, and especially since the end of World War II, countless efforts have been made in economics, psychology, political science, and sociology to illuminate the myriad manifestations of modern social life from a multiplicity of angles. It is doubtful that it would be possible to do justice to all the different variants of social science in an assessment of their relationship to critical theory.

☆ I presented aspects of this argument at the Philosophy and Social Science conference, Prague, Czech Republic, in May 2007; at the Sixth International Rethinking Marxism Conference, Amherst, MA, in October 2006; and at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Sociology Colloquium, in February 2002. I thank John Bradford and Lawrence Hazelrigg for helpful comments.

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Moreover, given the proliferation of critical theories since the 1980s, the effort to devise a “map” that would reflect the particular orientations and intricacies of each approach to critical theory would also be exacting in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the challenge of characterizing the relationship between social science and critical theory is greater still considering that all approaches to social science and to critical theory emerged within specific historical circumstances, to which they were a response, and which they reflect, in different ways and to differing degrees. For this reason alone, it is not likely that it would be possible to identify the constellation of social science and critical theory once and for all, independent of “time and space,” i.e., of *socio-historical context*. In fact, careful examination of the nature of the constellation at a particular point in time and space ought to produce valuable insights about the societal circumstances that prevail in a concrete context.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the absence of ongoing efforts to focus on the link between social science practice and context at a certain level of sophistication, examining the link between social science and critical theory is not likely to be particularly revealing or conclusive. Moreover, most approaches to understanding social life are oriented toward research in a manner that transcends the limitations imposed by actually existing societies on our ability to do so. Explicit consideration of how concrete circumstances may be detrimental to the effectiveness and pertinence of social research is the rare exception, rather than the rule, and for the most part regarded as “unscientific.”

One possible approach to remedying the neglect of context would be distinguishing between the actual disciplinary history of each social science, with regard to its stated successes and recognized failures, and its ability to confront, and live up to, what that history could and should have been. There are several possible reference frames for outlining the responsibility, purpose, and promise of a discipline. The measure could be how a discipline’s founders conceived of its characteristic contributions;<sup>3</sup> how competing approaches delineated the kind of contributions a discipline should make, compared to the other social sciences; how to assess the history of each discipline from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century; or how a discipline enables us to contribute to alleviating or solving current national and global challenges. What is much more important, however, is whether there is an ongoing and lively discussion within and between the individual social sciences, about the responsibility, purpose, and promise of each – a discussion that is driven by the desire to strive for the greatest correspondence between social scientists’ claims about their

particular discipline's contribution, effectiveness, and pertinence, regarding research as well as public policy, and their actual related contribution, effectiveness, and pertinence.<sup>4</sup>

Concordantly, to circumscribe the constellation between social science and critical theory, it would be imperative to make explicit, on a regular basis, the link between changing socio-historical conditions and challenges, and the "evolving" responsibilities and promise of each and all of the social science disciplines in time and space.<sup>5</sup> It would also be important to confront the fact that there appears to be a countervailing trend: while the social sciences as a whole are characterized by increasing diversity and accelerating fragmentation (theoretically and methodologically speaking), certain disciplines have tended to remain or to become more "monolithic"—such as economics, political science, and psychology – and other disciplines continue to diversify and fragment further and further – especially sociology.

Moreover, to differing degrees, directly and indirectly, efforts to illuminate patterns of co-existence in modern societies were oriented toward improving conditions in society. Especially after World War II, when the pursuit and incremental attainment of progress became an integral feature of society, and basis of political and social legitimacy in the context of the Cold War, progress was measured according to several criteria, especially economic well-being; social, economic, and job security; sanctity of life; political participation in collective decision-making processes; equality before the law; access to education and health care; and efficient natural resource extraction and utilization. In the interest of justifying ongoing private and especially public financial and institutional support of research in the social sciences, its results at least had to promise to be beneficial to underprivileged segments of population, to society "as a whole," or to "human civilization." The goal was success in all of the above-mentioned regards, and the assumption that success across the board is possible, and must be the guiding objective. Yet there was little or no consideration that success in one regard might come at the expense of any or most other regards. Indeed, such consideration would have been regarded as a betrayal of the promise and possibility of *both* social science and modern society.<sup>6</sup> Yet, from its inception, determining whether single-minded orientation toward progress in one regard, especially (though not exclusively) economic prosperity, might be detrimental to progress in other areas of social life, as well as in society as a whole, was one of the self-imposed, defining responsibilities of critical theory.

While critical theory must rely on the contributions of social science, many social scientists regard the contributions of critical theory as ancillary to their endeavors. As a consequence, in addition to it not being possible to

circumscribe the relationship between social science and critical theory once and for all, the contrary orientations of social scientists and critical theorists obscure the relationship between both further. Yet, if we were to follow well-established social science practice, we should try to provide focused working definitions of critical theory and social science, and delineate the relationship between both by formulating manageable hypotheses about the nature of the relationship. Instead, in the interest of raising a set of issues regarding the link between social science and critical theory that established discourse and research practice tend to neglect – even though they pertain directly to the purpose and promise of both – I will pursue a different strategy. To circumscribe the link between social science and critical theory, I will focus on the relative neglect of socio-historical context in mainstream approaches, and how the resulting tensions are detrimental to the analytical, descriptive, and practical pertinence and effectiveness of social science and social research today – at a time when revealing the dark side of modern society no longer may be merely desirable, but indeed, critically important for the survival of human civilization.<sup>7</sup>

## **DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

During the decades following World War II, there appeared to be mounting evidence that the efforts of social scientists to make valuable contributions to improving conditions for more and more people nationally and globally were bearing fruit, in different ways, at all levels of societal life – though neither across the board, nor simultaneously. In the context of the Cold War, modernization seemed to be the strategy of choice for stabilizing the Western model of democracy, for containing Soviet imperialism, for generating conditions conducive to economic growth and technological development, for diminishing the likelihood of war, and for strengthening human rights. As a consequence, public policies designed to enable national governments as well as international organizations to work toward the realization of explicitly stated and widely supported goals inspired by liberty, equality, solidarity, and self-determination appeared to become increasingly conducive to the attainment of stated objectives.

During the last quarter century, social scientists continued to be committed to producing the kind of knowledge needed to support the efforts of decision makers in positions of political and economic power, to amplify the effectiveness of public policies. Yet, achievements in politics, economics, culture, society, and natural environment, in the so-called “most

advanced” societies, neither seem to have translated into a greater capacity for overcoming social problems once and for all, nor to correspond with continuous qualitative improvements at the global level. Rather, the most advanced societies appear to remain in a state of stasis, striving to hold on to past achievements, in a context that is less and less conducive to successful public policies, in terms of stated goals, beyond the baseline that was reached during the 1970s. With regard to such indicators as social and economic inequality, labor conditions, and environmental degradation, progress and stability in the West appears to have been accompanied by a latent potential for crises to become more aggravated over time, both internally and externally, with changes in the geo-political context. Moreover, even if we confine ourselves to a purely economic cost-benefit analysis at the societal level, and ignore political, cultural, and social factors, presumed long-term achievements in advanced societies have begun to appear in an increasingly questionable and precarious light.

Until the end of the twentieth century, only proponents of approaches that are on the margins of the social science disciplines explicitly questioned that strategies in advanced societies for “mastering” political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and organizational challenges provided the avenues most conducive to success.<sup>8</sup> For the majority of social scientists, those strategies seemed to combine into the most promising model for less advanced (especially, less wealthy) societies to confront a multiplicity of challenges as well. Yet, the further we move into the twenty-first century, indications suggesting that those strategies did not enhance opportunities in advanced societies to realize *comprehensive* and *lasting* responses to those challenges (actual *solutions*) continue to proliferate. Thus, it is not accidental that what used to be perceived as the purported ability of advanced societies to confront a multiplicity of challenges in ways that are positively related to the nature of those challenges, is giving way to the sense that the perceived ability was tied to highly specific circumstances: a geopolitical and economic context characterized by acceptance of the global superiority of the most advanced societies. For practical purposes, given emerging global economic, political, and environmental challenges, superiority has begun to look far more tenuous and temporally limited.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Purported Superiority of the Western Model*

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the seemingly superior capacity of “Western,” “advanced,” or “modern” societies to

produce long-term solutions to a multiplicity of structural problems – problems that are a function of social structure – to increasing extent appears to have been a chimera. That superiority now appears as a projection that is contradicted by emerging probabilities of future trends, as its global environmental, political, and economic costs are becoming apparent, along with the fact that it is not sustainable. Today, in light of social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental costs, the superiority of the West is logically compelling mostly within the confines of advanced modern societies – *as ideology*, rather than as actually existing forms of societal organization. The issue is not that the problem-solving capacity of other actually existing societies and forms of social organization – such as traditional, authoritarian, or state-socialist – are superior to modern Western societies. In fact, the evidence would suggest that given economic and natural resource scarcity (both “home-grown” and as a consequence of prior and current geo-political position and policies of modern societies), and political institutions, cultural traditions, social structure, and technological capability, the problem-solving capacity of non-modern and non-Western societies has been below that of modern societies. Instead, the issue is that the idea that modern Western societies are superior to other types of society functions as an ideology that prevents the former to recognize its own limitations and inability to confront problems in ways that alleviate urgent challenges, regarding the underlying logic of those challenges, and their nature.

In the present context, the illusory nature of the superiority of the West is most evident in its unwillingness to conceive of strategies to confront challenges that are contingent on recognizing the actual gravity and contradictory character of social structures and practices. Contemporary societies appear to be just as incapable of applying critical reflexivity to the logic of modern social structure as it is discordant with “dominant ideology,” especially where such reflexivity would be the necessary precondition for qualitative improvements.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most conspicuous case in point is the fact that the modern way of economizing has been and continues to be based on the assumption that the Earth provides limitless resources, even though it has been evident since the beginning of modern capitalism, if not earlier, that resources are in fact limited, and that “production” is not possible without “destruction” – socially, ecologically, and organizationally.<sup>11</sup> Formulated more generally, the achievements of advanced societies are built on the assumption that it is justified to intervene into the natural, social, economic, and political environment, in the interest of realizing set goals, *without consistently and rigorously considering both the*

*destructive and unintended consequences of interventions, as well as our inclination to overlook those consequences, as par of the course.*

Indeed, the ideology of modern society may be the most apparent in the rejection of the need to reflect on the nature of reality in general, and of concrete challenges in particular, when reflection impedes the ability of decision makers to pursue well-established strategies or approaches to problems that are a function, and tied into the constitutional logic, of modern society – as a set of social structures and practices. Maintaining the *appearance* of a guiding concern about the nature of reality and concrete challenges, however, is an integral component of this ideology.<sup>12</sup>

Suppose that rather than pushing them to the side, we face the implications resulting from recent trends that appear increasingly disconcerting, not to say distressing, for our perspectives on modern society: population growth, resource depletion, rising inequalities, economic instability, increasingly volatile international tensions, pollution of the environment, and global warming. The superior problem-solving capacity of modern society increasingly resembles a projection that is a necessary precondition for the possibility of modern society as a form of societal organization. Today, it is difficult to deny that the West's problem-solving superiority never was as real as it appeared to its inhabitants – including most social scientists. Social and political stability, as a precondition for economic productivity and investment, would not have been sustainable without the projection of, and “faith” in, the West's superiority.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if social science is to be an effective and worthwhile undertaking, confronting directly the discrepancy between the projection and the actuality of modern society, and its ability to recognize and confront concrete and actual – rather than *simulated* – challenges, especially as they relate to social structure, must be the first order of business.<sup>14</sup>

Given the trajectories of overpopulation, overextraction of resources, and overpollution, ways in which the global community conceives and confronts economic, political, social, environmental, and cultural problems not only looks to be increasingly conducive to failure, but the strategies pursued appear to be at least partly responsible for the deepening state of crisis.<sup>15</sup> For a pointed assessment and critique, the origin of those strategies would need to be traced to the pursuit of economic and political modernization, i.e., of prosperity and democracy, in the historically highly peculiar context of Cold War institutions and policies, starting in the late 1940s.<sup>16</sup> Though those institutions and policies certainly are not the sole reason for the current crisis, continued tacit reliance on the approach to “solving” problems, especially after the official “end” of the Cold War in 1989,

appears to become increasingly problematic.<sup>17</sup> The failure of social scientists to scrutinize the socio-political and economic perimeter of the Cold War, as the socio-historical context in and from which the modern social sciences took hold, remains quite symptomatic of the reluctance to scrutinize the real as opposed to legendary origins of social science disciplines.<sup>18</sup>

*From Cold War to Globalization: Opportunity Costs of Professionalization*

Instead of recognizing the academic and public discourse about globalization since the early 1990s as an opportunity to re-envision the future, and to seize upon newly emerging imperatives and possibilities, decision makers in political, business, and international organizations and institutions continue to hold on to the purportedly successful strategies and policy models of what should be a bygone era. By holding on to the logic of the modernization/Cold War period, decision makers are trying to stretch its approach to reconciling facts and norms, especially with regard to the field of tensions between prosperity and democracy, beyond its historical perimeter.<sup>19</sup> It is impossible to tell whether this reluctance to confront new challenges is the expression of concern that the political and social stability of modern societies since World War II may have concealed an underlying fragility that is coming to the fore. Alternatively, the reluctance may also be a consequence of the inability to recognize and confront the new reality of globalizing capitalism, as a context fraught with complexities, contingencies, and contradictions (Dahms, 2005), and to conceive of the reconciliation of facts and norms beyond the perimeter of the post-World War II era. It may be symptomatic of this inability to acknowledge and transcend the costs of continued reliance on the Cold War configuration that, paradoxically, modern societies employ political and economic bureaucracies to pursue goals, and to achieve successes, whose realization and attainment appears to be incompatible with the organizational logic according to which those bureaucracies operate.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the depth and breadth of changes that have been altering and shaping the conditions of human existence to differing degrees and in different ways in all societies, most social scientists continue to rely on the well-established and “legitimate” research agendas and questions that were conceived and formulated during the Cold War era, and on corresponding modes of reflexivity. These questions and agendas have been sanctified within academic disciplines, and at educational and research institutions, during the second half of the twentieth century, and to a large extent account for the degree and nature of successes attained in the interim. Yet, those questions

and agendas inevitably also limit the scope of research interests and the effectiveness of research efforts and agendas, as soon as the questions provide a disincentive for social scientists to recognize that and how the configuration characteristic of a specific socio-historical context changes.

For instance, to a larger extent than would seem justified, we work with and perpetuate interpretations of both classical and more recent contributions to each and all of the social sciences, in the form of established theories and methodologies.<sup>21</sup> We continue to produce ever more subtle interpretations of the particular intent that appears to have inspired each classical framework – from Smith to Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Freud, Keynes, Parsons, and beyond. All the while, we seem interminably captured by continuously regenerated jargons and tacitly agreed-upon ways of reading that define the perimeter of legitimate interpretations and applications. Efforts to illuminate social life in ways that are truly and compellingly innovative, inspiring, meaningful, or enlightening to both academic and non-academic readers and audiences, are rare. At the same time, we are in no position to assess to what extent the scarcity of such efforts is indicative of deficits and lack of ability on the part of individual social scientists, of the logic of institutionally grounded and defined imperatives of legitimate research and success, or of the current socio-historical context imposing invisible barriers on innovative cognition as far as theorizing modern society is concerned – in ways that would qualitatively transform social science practice. The most important indication of successful cognition of this kind would be the disruption of the pattern of increasing fragmentation within and across the social sciences: the ability of social scientists to collaborate constructively, practically as well as theoretically.<sup>22</sup>

Presently, few social scientists would regard triggering “chains of reflection” that relativize and transcend the status quo – in ways that are directed at opening up perspectives on viable and preferable alternative futures, so as to translate into rigorous research questions and agendas – as part of their stated responsibility.<sup>23</sup> For the sake of professionally “respectable” social research, sparking – and carrying through *collaboratively* – analytically rigorous and theoretically sound processes of reflection related to, and necessitated by, changing historical conditions, is not part of the agenda of any established discipline. In the absence of overarching disciplinary discourses about the evolving mission of each and all of the social sciences in the changing socio-historical environment of globalization, regarding the issue of whether and how prevailing norms and values are reconcilable with societal transformations currently occurring, approaches in each discipline follow a trajectory of “progress” according to priorities

that mostly tend to be the function of agendas and designs carried over from the discipline's very own past.

Furthermore, the permanence of established idioms, canonized interpretations, and methodological orientations is the product of both the desire to foster progress in sociology, economics, psychology, and political science, as social *science*, rather than *social science* (in the sense of socially oriented and relevant science), and of imperatives of professional career and academic success.<sup>24</sup> This permanence may weaken our determination to face the most important issues of our time in ways that are comparable both to the efforts of the classics of each discipline and of critical theory, and to the outcome of their endeavors, mostly in two regards. On the one hand, given the pressures of professional success, such determination may become more difficult to sustain, as it requires commitment to a logic and process of inquiry that might be neither compatible with ever more precisely formulated career imperatives, nor conducive to inclusion and success in increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized academic and research institutions.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, given the forces that have been shaping research practices in the social sciences since the 1980s (as expressed most clearly in the growing emphasis on efficiency and accountability at universities and research institutions), the gulf between the priorities and imperatives that are shaping research and academic careers, and the investment of time and energy that would be required for the analytical depth and interpretive sensitivity to historical context conducive to appreciating the thrust of theoretical agendas, keeps widening (Assheuer, 2008). As a consequence, it is becoming more and more difficult to conceive of research efforts that compare to those of the classics in depth, breadth, and especially, in pertinence. It is especially symptomatic that there is no ongoing debate in the social science, as to what does, should, or would constitute *basic research*.

To be sure, my purpose here is not to suggest that efforts in the social sciences to discern and confront the conditions of our existence are not sincere, that the classics of each social science ought to be arbiters for the kind of research we should be doing today (even when appreciated carefully and adequately), or that research and theorizing in the social sciences during the second half of the past century was pointless, misguided, or irrelevant. Instead, my effort is directed at providing the context for suggesting that there is a *glitch* in the "program" of all the social sciences that appear to prevent each from contributing to the kind of progress in society that points beyond present social structures *in their specificity* – and that identifying and scrutinizing this glitch has been the distinctive charge of critical theory. The ability to pinpoint how present societal conditions are politically, culturally,

socially, and economically specific is a necessary precondition for conceiving of strategies to confront and solve problems that, for now, remain *utopian* in the sense of *objectively unattainable*.<sup>26</sup> For now, we refrain from making explicit how exactly societies today, as social structures, are specific in space and time, and how social stability, political control, and economic prosperity are contingent on the invisibility of particular conceptions of reality, notions about reality, and practices in reality, to most individuals as well as social scientists. Yet, in order to engender the kind of social research whose results will enable social actors to engage in forms of individual as well as collective action (politics, research, education, etc.) that are positively related to the nature of concrete challenges at hand, the constitutional principle of modern society must become visible, especially where it is in profound conflict with representations of that principle in socialization, education, and politics.<sup>27</sup>

What complicates matters further is the need to rigorously scrutinize that dimension of social structure that is, at the same time, the force that overlays all specific forms of social, political, economic, and cultural existence in the modern age – and the formative concern of critical theory: *alienation*.<sup>28</sup> However, we may conceive in detail that the concept of alienation is meant to capture – ongoing transformations of societal forms of existence are the inevitable corollary of the spread of the capitalist mode of production – its entwinement with the nature of social change is central to modern society. As a consequence, it is not sufficient for social scientists to be concerned with the link between specific forms of societal existence as they undergo change, and the inevitable transformative impact of change in the modern age, on practices, institutions, and processes. The specificity of those forms is integral to the force-field of modern capitalism whose perpetually distorting effects social researchers in the tradition of Marxian theorizing have been striving to capture, by employing such concepts as alienation, commodity fetishism, reification, and instrumental reason: that *in the modern age, it is categorically impossible to take a straight look at anything social, political, economic, or cultural*.

## **CONSIDERING CONTEXT: CONFRONTING THE SPECIFICITY OF MODERN SOCIETIES**

Ironically, as professional social scientists, it is neither part of our day-to-day activities, nor of our disciplinary responsibility, to identify and

counteract the kinds of deficits that are built into our work, as an inevitable consequence of the fact that we are *immersed* in time and space – in concrete socio-historical contexts. We do not examine and spell out whether, and how exactly, concrete socio-historical circumstances are conducive to, or may limit, our ability to actualize the claims we set out to do. Rather, we work with two assumptions, above all, that are likely to be more problematic than we are willing, or able, to recognize – given professional and institutional constraints, as instances of structural and systemic societal constraints.

The first assumption pertains to the fact that in order for our work to be useful and relevant for individuals, organizations, and institutions, it must relate to perspectives, experiences, and challenges in actual circumstances. To the extent that as social scientists we subscribe to reality in a manner that is compatible with what we might call everyday life experiences and constraints, our contributions will be relevant to a certain degree, by default. On the other hand, as social scientists, subscribing to reality, as it exists for “real” individuals, organizations, and institutions, is likely to conflict with our efforts to illuminate societal realities. As a general principle, all societies (as integrated aggregations of different types of orders: social, political, economic, cultural, rational, ethnic, gender, etc.) sustain stability and integrity by limiting and channeling transparency regarding its defining features, as far as possible, while still being conducive to stability and integrity. The frameworks to study social life presented by the classics of sociology – such as those of Durkheim and Weber – confronted the challenge of conceiving of social science in the context of modern society, as a form of societal organization that may have more in common with premodern societies than we “moderns” tend to presuppose, and are supposed to consider possible (Latour, 1993). Social stability is contingent on the willingness of members of society to subscribe to notions and values that support and reinforce the projections that *modern* society must generate and regenerate of itself, as a necessary precondition for the possibility of social order, in an environment that is prone to instability. If members would be allowed or encouraged to face the actuality of modern society, as far as functional imperatives, structural patterns, and ideologies are concerned, modern society would have to generate and maintain a rather different mode of securing stability and integrity. One of the main challenges for theoretically oriented social scientists is whether such a society would still be *modern*, in the sense in which we commonly use the term.

Regarding the tension between the logic of social structure and efforts to illuminate this logic, we could go one step further (Kontopoulos, 1993).

Modern societies may remain stable due to organizations and institutions responding to demands for accountability and transparency, especially as far as the defining features of specific societies are concerned, only within limits that are conducive to maintaining those features and the corresponding social structure *in their specificity*, and by continuously utilizing newly emerging opportunities to conceal those features. The stability and security of social order may be contingent to a high degree on the willingness of individuals (including social scientists) to entertain as germane to understanding modern social reality, the representations a specific social order produces of itself – *precisely in order to limit transparency, as a precondition for stability – not the stability of social order in general, but the stability of a social order in its specificity*. Yet, stability is not free from normative content – the imperative of maintaining stability provides the scaffolding of the very norms and values that individuals at the same time take for granted, interpret, and misconstrue as their most personal characteristics, impulses, and inclinations.

The second assumption is more directly related to our labor as social scientists. As a matter of course, we must presume our efforts to illuminate the conditions of our existence to be sincere, and driven by the desire to do justice to the challenge at hand. This is especially true where illumination matters most – for instance, where shining light on features that tend to remain in the dark is a necessary precondition for solving, rather than regenerating, social problems. As a consequence, we usually surmise that our efforts ought to be successful – to the extent that our skills and intelligence are conducive to the attainment of success, to whatever extent success may be “objectively possible,” in a given environment.<sup>29</sup> Yet, if we take as the measure of “success” the ability of individuals, organizations, and institutions to tackle emerging challenges, by engaging in increasingly more effective strategies that are being measured in terms of the degree to which they are conducive to *both* rational *and* reasonable solutions to social problems, the contributions of social–scientific research appear more questionable. Viewed from this angle, we must scrutinize whether and how existing conditions are conducive to what kinds of “successes,” and consider that in all likelihood, conditions from the outset orient and limit possibilities of attaining success, as well as notions of reason and rationality, in ways that support, reinforce, and conceal those conditions. Yet, we could argue, it is precisely the purpose of such concepts as success, reason, and rationality, to engender the ability to acknowledge and identify the confines within which social research is bound to occur – confines that remain invisible, in the absence of determined efforts to make them accessible.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of theoretical logic, it is a matter of principle that we must regard as problematic notions of reason and rationality that are condoned by and directly compatible with “social structure,” as shorthand for societal systems of institutions and organizations, and structures of power and inequality. For instance, those individuals, organizations, and institutions that put forth, favor, or champion notions of reason and rationality that are entwined with social structure also resist critical reflexivity with regard to the *immersion* of concepts of rationality and reason in socio-historical contexts. Given the affinity between their particular interests, and concrete social structures, as in part both cause and effect of those structures at the same time, prevailing notions of reason and rationality are likely to be warped. Such notions, and especially their being summoned for purposes of legitimating – *rationalizing* – the prevalence of specific forms of power and inequality, reflect the limitations of context, rather than making them visible. Such rationalizing notions undercut possibilities to conceive of *rational* and *reasonable* approaches to meeting challenges and solving problems in a different sense as well. Approaches that would point beyond socio-historical practices and forms of organization whose problematic nature is increasingly apparent, in the present historical context, are more and more difficult to convey to individuals and social scientists. Wherever immersed notions of rationality and reason are conducive to problems getting solved, rather than managed in a manner that may in fact be inversely related to their solution, the absence of critical reflexivity is not especially problematic. Yet, where those notions are a function of problems being managed, as is more frequently the case, without recognition that the prospect of their solution is not part of the equation, “*reason*” and “*rationality*” *themselves are the problem*. To the extent that social scientists engage in research and theorizing without working with the distinction between immersed notions of reason and rationality, on the one hand, and such notions that would enable social scientists to thematize the perimeter and defining features of the context that is to be scrutinized, the result of research is more likely to be part of the problem as well.

Paradoxically, one characteristic feature of our “success” as professional social scientists appears to be our ability to explain to individuals, organizations, and institutions *that and how* in the present context, efforts to advance socially desirable goals are less than likely to succeed, in terms of stated goals, whenever they go beyond those condoned in the confines of existing social structures – without being able to explain *why* this is so. Explaining the obstacles to advancing socially desirable goals would require

that we focus to a far greater extent on the *specificity* of the dynamic processes that enable the modern social structure to maintain and reconstitute itself, as it relies on the proliferation of continuously deepening contradictions and paradoxes – even though this proliferation is not likely to be sustainable and conducive to societal stability in the long run (Postone, 1993). To the extent that social research and social theorizing are oriented toward engendering higher levels of reason and rationality, and qualitative transformations that are conducive to a greater reconciliation of facts and norms than is possible today, they conflict with the dynamic constitutional logic of modern society. We need to focus on the link between social science practice and social research, and the concrete and internally contradictory features of social structure, as part of our ongoing efforts as social scientists. Thus, we may postulate that *to the degree that we refuse to address in a systematic manner, as an integral component of our work, the link between our practices as social scientists and the contradictions of modern society, with regard to the concrete and specific consequences for our research, we may not only betray the claim to be social scientists, we actively – albeit unintentionally – may sabotage the possibility of social science.*

It would seem, then, that the *glitch* in the program of social science alluded to earlier takes the form of an invisible barrier that “mainstream” approaches neither have the means nor the incentive to recognize.<sup>31</sup> This barrier would appear to play a key role in preventing actual progress in social sciences as well as in society. Despite ongoing and determined efforts, even incremental progress whose attainment is non-ambivalent, appears elusive – both in terms of engendering higher levels of reconciling facts and norms in contemporary societies, and in terms of explicating what preconditions would have to be in place for higher levels of reconciling facts and norms to become possible. That is, of course, unless we preinterpret changes and trends currently underway, e.g., globalization, as necessarily constituting progress. The kind of knowledge of our social world and the forces shaping it that would be a necessary precondition for taking steps in the direction of actually *solving problems*, however, appears to remain astonishingly rudimentary, and increasingly incompatible with imperatives that govern decision-making in institutions and organizations, along with appreciation of the kind of reflexivity that would facilitate such knowledge. Indeed, modern society appears to “evolve” according to a dynamic logic that is incompatible with the achievement of solutions to social problems – modern society appears to be synonymous with the perpetuity of problems having to be managed, rather than solved.

## **SOCIAL SCIENCE VERSUS CRITICAL THEORY?**

Throughout the history of the social sciences, the majority of economists, psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists have regarded critical theory – as well as its precursors, especially Hegel, Marx, and Freud – as ancillary to rigorous research at best, and as an undesirable, misguided, and even frivolous distraction, at worst. To be sure, those who regarded the contributions of critical theory as irrelevant or ineffective also tended to be representatives of precisely the kind of approaches to social science and social research that critical theorists have been scrutinizing since the 1930s. Especially in its inception as what later came to be known as the “Frankfurt School,” at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, under the leadership of Max Horkheimer since 1932, critical theory began as the project of illuminating how “traditional” theories of modern society, conceptions of social science, approaches to studying social life, and practices of doing research start out from largely implicit, yet highly problematic assumptions about the relationship between social science and society, in the sense of social science and concrete socio-historical context.<sup>32</sup>

Since the early 1930s, critical theory has stood as a reminder that the specific economic, political, cultural, and ideological configurations of socio-historical contexts have a direct bearing on the form, content, practice, and normative orientation of both social life and social sciences. Yet, rather than explicitly developing and pursuing its concern with the immersion of social life and the social sciences in space and time as a consistent feature of critical theory, individual representatives have confronted the issue more or less explicitly, to differing degrees, and in a variety of ways. There may be multiple reasons for why this feature of critical theory has not been more central to the tradition as a whole. Making accessible the link between particular formations of societal life within the same genus, such as modern industrialized society, and the ways in which they shape and influence concrete practices, concepts, ideas, and institutions, may be among the greatest challenges social scientists confront. One aspect of the challenge is the difficulty of stepping back from social reality in a manner that enables observers to recognize the particularity of formations of societal life, and its significance for how we coexist and make choices. Another aspect is that the challenge cannot be confronted effectively by individual social scientists, but requires the kind of ongoing collaborative efforts that are increasingly difficult to sustain in the present context given institutional and career constraints.

*Two Dimensions of Societal Reality*

While social scientists as a matter of principle tend to focus on those features and dimensions of societal life that logically are prior to issues of change, e.g., “static” structures and systemic characteristics, institutions, practices, notwithstanding the disciplinary proclivity towards dynamic issues of change, critical theorists regard as the penultimate purpose of the social sciences to track changes as they manifest themselves within concrete reference frames, whose potentially problematic nature required focused attention.<sup>33</sup> To illustrate this issue, we might visualize societal reality as divided into two interconnected, yet distinct, dimensions.

In the *first dimension*, the traditional province of social science, societal reality is described and analyzed, depending on the particular tradition at issue, e.g., at the level of practices, modes of interaction, institutions, spheres of life, or social subsystems. Constellations between sets of institutions that are critical to society’s ability to fulfill a multiplicity of increasingly differentiated tasks and functions, and which are characteristic of the type of society scrutinized, also belong to this dimension. Social research is concerned with the kinds of co-existence, decision-making, priorities, values, and practices that go hand in hand with those constellations, e.g., in modern industrialized societies.

In addition, both comparative and historical approaches in the social sciences recognize the variations that occur between societies, regarding the features of societal reality that individual incarnations of a general type of society have in common.<sup>34</sup> For instance, with differing degrees of variation, British, French, German, and American societies all adhere and function according to the same basic design of modern industrialized society, comprising the same components, such as the legal system, democratic political institutions, and market economy. This kind of variations has been framed, e.g., in the language of “exceptionalism” (especially with regard to American exceptionalism).<sup>35</sup> Drawing on the work of Karl Polanyi, since the 1980s, a growing number of social scientists, especially in economic sociology, have also been examining the social and cultural embeddedness of economic institutions – a perspective and approach that in principle can be applied to all aspects of modern societies. Yet, despite the apparent importance of comparative as well as historical approaches (and especially comparative–historical approaches) to social science, they have remained subordinate and marginal within each individual discipline, and largely a matter of individual social scientists’ preference whether to apply and pursue or not. Still, concerns that relate to the spatial and temporal

variations between, and the embeddedness of “non-social” (economic, political, military, educational, etc.) institutions and organizations in, modern societies (regarding cultural and social life), belong to the first dimension, in the terminology suggested here. In other words, comparative perspectives focus on the concrete form that the general framework of a type of society, as well as its components, take, both regarding forms of solidarity, structures of inequality, and their role in society, economic, political, legal institutions, organizations and forms of power, and their interrelations – both as cause and effect of cultural and religious traditions, and modes of collective action.<sup>36</sup>

For instance, when comparing economic or political systems in two distinct societies of the same type, social scientists tend to be interested in determining what kind of social relations correspond with capitalist economies or democratic government, in all societies of that type – especially modern society. To the extent that social scientists are concerned with the specifics of the differences between capitalist economies or democratic government in societies of the same genus, and their relationship with social relations, those social scientists are regarded, and usually regard themselves, as working in a specialized area within a discipline – the assumption being that the relevance of research questions asked and results generated is limited to the subdiscipline, and usually do not have a bearing on the discipline as a whole.

By contrast, the *second dimension* of societal reality concerns qualitative transformations in the general framework of a type of society (and its components) that accompany changes of the kind that alter the meaning and nature of “social,” “economic,” “political.” Such changes and qualitative transformations are exceedingly difficult to discern, in part because the distinction between cause and effect is most elusive. Capturing this kind of change requires a mindset, analytical framework, and set of tools that an orientation toward the traditional concerns of social science neglect – toward the first dimension of societal reality. In a sense, these kinds of change occur below the radar screen of traditional social science, even though they may be as momentous, if not more so, than changes that has been a defining concern for the latter since their inception. Given the overall orientation and self-understanding of critical theory, the impact resulting from such changes at the level of institutions, spheres of life, and social subsystems is of primary importance, as well as at the level of social and cultural life, is most important.

Traditional social scientists tend to confine their rigorous labor to the nature of social relations that correspond with political, economic, and

cultural forms in modern societies, working with the assumption that the link, e.g., between social relations and capitalist market economies should be viewed as static. By contrast, critical theorists are much more concerned with the transformations that inevitably occur at the social and cultural level, within forms of organization, and especially with regard to the constellations that are characteristic of modern societies. Put differently, in terms of the distinction between social science and critical theory, proponents of the latter charge that social scientists tend to neglect the fact that all elements of societal reality maintain stability by continually adapting to an environment that is inherently dynamic, rather than static. Critical theorists favor and rely on dialectical approaches and tools, because those are uniquely well-suited for studying processes and dimensions of reality that adhere to patterns whose nature cannot be captured with means that are not tailored to capture the inherently dynamic qualities of modern societal reality. Concordantly, if the dynamic logic of capitalist market economies requires ongoing adaptations that engender transformations, which in turn permeate forms of social coexistence, it is inevitable that the nature of social relations will change as well. As a tradition, critical theory stands for the contention that unless social scientists explicitly track and examine such adaptations and transformations, their manifestations are likely to be overlooked. Furthermore, the nature of social relations may undergo qualitative transmutations of a kind that alters practices, priorities, choices, and values – without which the transmutations are not likely to be being detected in a timely fashion. Yet, from the vantage point of critical theory, it is essential that social scientists be concerned with changes of this kind; due to their preferred position to recognize changes and their consequences, it is their responsibility, and especially because recognizing changes and consequences is a necessary precondition for detecting their impact on conceptions of the responsibilities of social scientists, and the practice of social research itself.

### *The Immersion of Social Science in Society*

Recognizing societal phenomena in their dynamic particularity is contingent on the willingness, first, to differentiate between the dimensions of societal life that are stable, and more similar than not across societies of the same type, especially *modern society*, and those dimensions that are variable, and specific, and for which dimensions of the first type provide the foil. Secondly, it is necessary to distance oneself from one's own societal

environment – the environment that provided the context for identity formation.<sup>37</sup>

Given that Karl Marx's critiques of alienation and commodity fetishism provided key reference points for the development of critical theory, its representatives were initially concerned with the changing influence of increasingly bureaucratic forms of economic organization in capitalism on modern society and social research, and the link between society and social science.<sup>38</sup> During the decades that followed, critical theorists expanded their concerns to scrutinize processes in society that impacted on the ability of social scientists to grasp the contradictory nature of social life in modern society: the subversion and inversion of the enlightenment in the interest of economic prosperity (Horkheimer & Adorno), the emergence and spread of culture industry (Adorno), increasingly complex bureaucratic structures (Marcuse), the erosion of the public sphere and the ideological tendencies of technology and the natural sciences (Habermas).<sup>39</sup> Yet, overall, the commitment of critical theory to illuminating how exactly concrete socio-historical conditions shape and influence social life, and especially research and theoretical endeavors in each of the social sciences, has to date remained relatively implicit, submerged, and marginal to the tradition.

What came to be called "mainstream"<sup>40</sup> approaches in the social sciences during the 1970s have been resisting the contention that there is a categorical need for all social scientists to be critically reflexive, regarding the immersion of social science practice and social research in space and time. A simple comparison between two distinct social reference frames may illustrate the importance of critical reflexivity regarding context.

Take a society where dominant values to a continually increasing extent reflect, and are a function of, stories of personal economic success and wealth creation characteristic of a particular elite. Compare this society to another where prevailing values correspond with a widely practiced ability to cooperate and collaborate with others, in a manner that is "hard-wired" into individuals' identities. In addition, in the first case, the dominant values may not be recognizable to most members of society to the same degree and in the same way, as in the second case. In the first case, individual and social efforts to advance social justice or the reconciliation of facts and norms for most citizens in a tangible way would be strenuous, if not futile, since it would be impossible for most to be economically successful and wealthy. In the second case, the likelihood of individual and social efforts directed at increasing social justice would be distinctly more likely to bear fruit. The differential in ability to recognize dominant values might be a consequence of the cognitive dissonance such recognition would likely provoke in the first

case – assuming that the society would be characterized by a high degree of social and economic inequality – while there would not be a comparable cognitive dissonance in the second case.<sup>41</sup>

Evidently, in these two cases, social research and social science practice would be immersed in qualitatively different societal contexts – each context influencing the kind of questions social scientists would ask, framing the purpose and value of social research, and prioritizing the production of certain kinds of knowledge and insights as a function of societal context. From the perspective of critical theory, the notion that it should be possible to advance and engage in social science in ways that abstract from the specific features of both societal contexts would be unrealistic, ill-conceived, and ideological in the literal sense. In the extreme, such conceptions of social science suggest that the purposes of social science can and must be delineated independently of the concrete challenges that characterize particular societal contexts. As has been noted before, critical theory contests the possibility of “value-free” social science in this sense. To varying degrees, its proponents contend that in contexts where differences and changes are subtle, and may become manifest over time, the particulars of economic, political, organizational, cultural, social, and ideological context and change are especially important, as far as influence over “legitimate” questions, “relevant” research, and “desirable” knowledge and insights is concerned. However subtle the differences and changes between contexts in time and space may be, or appear to be, their consequences for both social life and social science could be most momentous – especially if social scientists exclude them from the process and purview of social research.

### *The Issue of “Globalization”*

Since the 1990s, there has been widespread public awareness and concern about the phenomenon of “globalization.” It is evident that efforts to illuminate effectively a phenomenon that comprises as many distinct discernable processes as globalization, and to disentangle competing meanings and interpretations of the concept, will require extensive and ongoing collaborative research. Yet, the willingness and ability of social scientists to agree, for instance, on a set of working definitions of globalization that would be conducive to collaborative research, has remained astonishingly limited, within disciplines, and especially across disciplines. Agreeing to the need for mutually arrived at and binding working definitions is not part of social science practice and process. Yet,

given that globalization is a process characterized by high degree of complexities, contingencies, and contradictions, the formulation of research strategies that would be conducive to generating a rigorous understanding of the issues involved will depend on cooperation and collaboration within and across the social sciences.

The argument could be made that the failure to agree on what would be necessary and promising approaches to studying globalization, given the concrete and unprecedented challenges that its analysis entails – including agreement regarding the desirability of such approaches – is at least as likely to be a function of the nature of globalization as an expression of the contradictory nature of modern society, as of the flaws of individual social scientists, specific approaches in each of the disciplines, and social science as a whole – and probably much more so. We must determine whether our inability to arrive at a meaningful set of perspectives on how to study globalization effectively originates within the social sciences. To do so, we must assess whether the apparent ineffectiveness of social science may be related to, and the manifestation of, emerging dimensions and features of modern social life of which concern about globalization is the most recent expression. Put differently, what if what we diagnose as flawed and ineffective social science is in fact a consequence of that which we are trying to understand: modern society, as it changes over time? If globalization is not a distinct stage of “evolution” or “development,” but instead the most recent, discernable incarnation of modern society and its paradoxical constitutional logic – would that not mean that we would have to link directly our assessment of what social science is and should be, to our ability to grasp that which is the most important subject matter of social science – modern society?

Grasping the nature of globalization would require a willingness to confront the paradoxical and contradictory features of this process. Yet, to begin with, both historically and especially after World War II, the traditional social sciences have evolved in ways that exclude from the spectrum of legitimate research concerns consideration of the centrality of concrete structural and systemic contradictions to modern society, and the possibility of studying them in a systematic manner. If we frame difficulties to agree on working definitions of globalization in terms of this process constituting the culmination of all the contradictory processes that have been shaping the modern age, then such agreement will continue to be impossible as long as social scientists refuse to confront the central role of contradictions, and their entwinement with and aggravation of complexities and contingencies, to the design and stability of modern societies. At the same

time, how globalization keeps changing conditions of existence on Earth, in all areas of societal life, provides an excellent, as well as urgent, concrete reference frame for illustrating the importance of examining carefully how changing societal conditions, by sheer necessity, reconfigure practices and conceptions in society, including especially practices and conceptions in each and all the social sciences. *After all, it certainly is not inconceivable that, first, many assumptions that have guided mainstream research, in light of globalization, turn out to have been erroneous to differing degrees, and secondly, that what we frame in terms of globalization denotes processes that alter features of societal life in ways that supersede what used to be compelling and accurate representations of features of societal life in the past.*

Yet, the purpose of this chapter is not to scrutinize globalization, but to address difficulties in mainstream approaches to recognize and confront related challenges and dilemmas. Among mainstream social scientists, resistance to considering the specifics of socio-historical context takes many forms, the following being among the more prominent:

- the strict separation between the logic of scientific method and the analysis of the characteristic features of socio-historical context;
- the determined refusal to acknowledge that the centrality of contradictions to modern society influences concrete research agendas and modes of research, to scrutinize concrete contradictions and implications resulting from their centrality, and to determine the nature of the link between contradictions and social forms; and
- the ingrained unwillingness to ensure that claims made about the purpose and consequences of research coincide with its actual orientation and effects within socio-historical contexts that constitutionally (with regard to structural features and systemic imperatives) may prevent the actualization of those claims.

The guiding observation of critical theory is that in the social sciences, mainstream approaches tend to be detrimental to research that would be theoretically enlightening, socially empowering, and politically, morally, and psychologically conducive to the kind of reconciliation of facts and norms without whose promise and prospect modern society would neither have taken shape as it did, nor be able to function as it does.

Conceptually, in the name of *social science*, economists, psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists *should* be committed to advancing the emancipation of both human beings and societies from structural and systemic constraints that both result from, and sustain, our inability to know and understand, i.e., to *recognize*, how the defining features of modern

societal reality prevent actors from actualizing socially desirable goals. Social science in this sense is especially important where such constraints prevent the ability of individuals, collective actors, and organizations and institutions to pursue and realize comprehensively rational and lasting solutions to social problems – to take steps in the direction of reconciling facts and norms. *Critical theory continues as a tradition above all because most social scientists claim, implicitly or explicitly, that their efforts are directed at both theoretical and practical emancipation from constraints, without ascertaining that their efforts in fact are conducive to such emancipation, especially where constraints are both integral to the possibility of social order, in its specificity, and detrimental to human and societal agency, at the same time.*

### *The Place of Theory in Social Science*

As the title of Lemert's (2007) most recent book suggests, social theory is about "thinking the unthinkable" – about enabling both individuals and social scientists to recognize and appreciate the condition of their existence and responsibility as human actors. Critical theorists would add that social theories are attempts to enable individuals, and especially social scientists, to think the "socially" unthinkable, *in a socio-historical context – modern society – whose principle of reconstitution is contingent on the successful conditioning of the vast majority of its members into a societal reality that maintains itself through a multiplicity of fundamental and irreconcilable contradictions.* This conditioning compels all individuals, including most social scientists, as members of modern society, to frame the challenge of critical self-reflexivity regarding everyday self as a carrier of the defining features of modern society, in ways that reinforce those features of modern society, against both implied and publicly stated intentions – and interests – of individuals, social scientists, collective actors, and society. Concordantly, as long as social scientists refrain from integrating this kind of critical self-reflexivity into social research and social science practice, both constitute little more than hypothetical language games – on the assumption that scrutinizing the specific link between socio-historical contexts and social science in fact is immaterial to the possibility, promise, and responsibility of social science.

Critical theorists insist that it is symptomatic of the socio-historical configuration of modern society that social scientists may claim to engage in research that is both socially beneficial and conducive to conceiving of actual solutions to social problems, while refusing to confront the most

central dilemma: the link between the defining features of socio-historical context, the ways in which social problems are integral to sustaining those features, and the specific orientations and agendas of each of the social science disciplines, respectively. Emancipation from structural and systemic societal constraints is a necessary precondition for individuals' ability to be self-reflexive, to recognize their talents, and to realize their potential. The same applies to social scientists. Contrary to its ideology, modern society channels the capacity to engage in reflexivity, uncover and apply talents, and realize one's potential in ways that feed back into constitutional design, with contradictions providing the scaffolding. Yet, against dominant ideology, the resulting interconnecting feedback loops in all dimensions of socio-cultural life are both so comprehensive and so subtle that critical self-reflexivity – *with regard to one's socially constructed and determined self* – requires a firmly committed and never-ending effort. Recognizing the defining features of one's own society is a necessary precondition for individuals' and social scientists' ability to be critically self-reflexive. Those who are not able to recognize the particularities of their own society, are constitutionally incapable of being "self-reflexive" – regarding the ability to formulate and realize their personal or professional life-goals, to shape the circumstances of their existence and success, and their capacity to relate to "others" (members of "other" social groups, in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) – in ways that avoid replication of structural inequalities in society, and reliance on structural inequalities for purposes of forming and sustaining identities. In short, it is exceedingly difficult for individuals to construct meaningful life-histories that depart from the patterns characteristic of societal context.

While such impediments to individuals' ability to engage in critical self-reflexivity would be a necessary precondition for the very possibility of social order in all complex societies, it is disturbingly paradoxical in modern society – which conforms to and relies on this pattern to a greater degree than dominant ideology would admit. Moreover, it would be unrealistic for social scientists to expect individuals to be able to recognize the distinctive features of societies whose stability and possibility is contingent on the concealment of those features from its members. Yet, if the majority of social scientists refuse to be critically self-reflexive with regard to the gravity of their own society's defining features, and deny the possibility that those features exert a kind of force that resists recognition and escape, without sustained efforts – what then is the meaning of "social science"?

Implicitly or explicitly, critical theorists contend that social scientists striving to recognize the defining features of their own society is integral to

social research and social science. Social science must be oriented toward enabling and compelling societies to allow for qualitative changes regarding those structural and systemic societal constraints that sustain social problems – as a means to preserve especially those defining features of social order that are resistant to actual, comprehensive, and lasting progress. The emancipation of individuals from those constraints is the necessary precondition for emancipating society from shackles, preventing steps toward the reconciliation of facts and norms, which would constitute real progress. More importantly, for present purposes, without the emancipation of social scientists from the constraints, social science is in danger of being an accomplice in the prevention of steps toward such reconciliation. The constraints are most conspicuous regarding the inability of modern society to solve social problems, and to recognize and confront this inability as a function of the synergistic capacity of both established structures and systems of power and inequality, and of human actors and social groups who benefit most from those structures and systems, both knowingly and unknowingly, to maintain the prevailing configuration of societal life, *in their image*. Whatever the material, demographic, geographic limitations – the structural and systemic societal constraints add a further burden that obstructs opportunities to reconcile facts and norms. Revealing and dissecting these constraints ought to be the primary domain of the social sciences; by default, their neglect distorts whatever efforts social scientists make to illuminate social life.

Despite the sustained rejection by mainstream social scientists of contributions made by critical theorists, since the 1970s a continuously growing number of critical theorists have been making efforts to accommodate the standards and views of mainstream social science. In the interest of demonstrating how critical theory is not merely *critical of* – but also and especially *critical to* – the overall project of social science, proponents of critical theory have been reconceiving its agenda and orientation, to facilitate greater compatibility with mainstream approaches and perspectives. Surmising that the gulf separating critical theory and mainstream social science is circumstantial rather than foundational, and that mainstream social scientists will welcome the prospect of overcoming mystifying and frustrating hurdles against explicating paradoxes and dilemmas inherent to modern society, critical theorists of the second and third generations, represented by Habermas and Honneth, respectively, have been reconstructing critical theory. Yet, it seems that despite ongoing efforts by critical theorists to advocate the importance of their contributions in the context of globalization, mainstream approaches have become less,

rather than more, pervious to the kind of reflexivity critical theory represents. Thus, we must ask whether the efforts of a growing number of critical theorists to encourage and enable mainstream social science to become more critically reflexive, by treating its objectives, tools, and criteria for effective research as the relevant reference frame, may endanger the commitment of critical theory to the kind of questions, concerns, and tools that are *its* specific and sole domain.

## **CRITICAL THEORY VERSUS MAINSTREAM SOCIAL SCIENCE?**

Despite its marginalized status in each of the social sciences, especially in economics, psychology, and political science, but also in sociology, *critical theory is key to the overall mission of social science* – of all the social sciences. Efforts in the individual social sciences to illuminate societal life in a rigorous manner will be futile as long as the specific issues that are the primary concern of critical theorists remain unaddressed in those efforts. Assuming that critical theory has an important and unique contribution to make to the social sciences that is both substantively and methodologically related to the nature of modern society, my claim is as follows: *Precisely to the degree that the issues that define the core agenda of critical theory remain implicit or are neglected entirely, in particular research designs and agendas, those designs and agendas are confined to hypothetical arguments and analyses – on the contingency that the nature of modern society as framed by critical theory, does not matter to efforts to study social life.* Pursuant to this claim, there is an imminent need to critically and scrupulously evaluate each social science, as well as each approach within each social science, with regard to the degree to which it addresses the issues that define critical theory. Evidently, we barely are in the position to register the importance of such an evaluation, not to mention the scale and scope at which it would have to be undertaken.

What are the issues defining critical theory? More specifically, is it possible to identify the “core” of Frankfurt-School-type neo-Marxist critical theory, both in its original incarnation and in more recent versions of critical theory? How internally consistent, compatible, and conducive to circumscribing their core are the different “generations” of Frankfurt School critical theorizing?<sup>42</sup> With regard to theoretical logic, what is the overarching agenda common to the first generation of critical theory, as represented by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, the second generation